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->From the Editor's Keyboard              "Saying it like it is!"
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Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to all!! I'm trying to recover from
a holiday gathering at my in-laws - still haven't really looked at any of
my gifts yet. I'll do that later tonight, and over the weekend. Although
our gift-giving this year was not extravagant this year (not that has been
in recent years!), but we got some nice things. Mostly "practical" gifts,
but a few "toys" to round things out. And the dogs made out like bandits
this year with plenty of treats to keep them busy for a long time! It was
a nice day to spend with relatives - even the ones that we were hoping would
not drop by! Hard to do when most of the family lives in the same
triple-decker house in Boston!

Anyway, hope that you're having or had a great holiday, filled with family
and friends, good food, and some great gifts. The holiday shopping is over
and no more shopping ads everywhere you look. And as much as I enjoy
listening to SOME holiday music, I'll be so happy not to hear any more on
the radio and at work!

So, while we all wind down from the festivities, let me take this time to
thank you all for being faithful readers this past year! As I've mentioned
numerous times over the past 11 years, without you, we wouldn't be here
week after week for all these years - thank you for your continued support!
Happy New Year!

Until next year...

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                        PEOPLE ARE TALKING
                       compiled by Joe Mirando
                         joe@atarinews.org

As of press time, it seems that Joe is out celebrating the holiday with
family, and probably enjoying an eggnog or two. And if I know Joe, there
likely is a turkey feast involved, as well. Suffice to say, I'm sure that
Joe shares the same thoughts as I do during this holiday season. And, he
will have some more words of wisdom to share with you the first of the new
year!

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->In This Week's Gaming Section  - Cheaper Gaming PCs Are Decent
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""    China Blames Online Games!
                                   Boston Mom Calls Cops!




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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   -  The Latest Gaming News!
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                 Cheaper Gaming PCs Offer Decent Experience

Personal computers designed specifically for gamers are getting more
powerful and more affordable by the month. They're bursting with
multi-core processors, powerful video graphics cards and plenty of memory
to give you the most realistic graphics and action.

Although it should come as no surprise that the computers that can run
games consistently well are the ones at the high end of the price
spectrum, I found machines for about $1,000 that can give you decent play.

The cheapest ones, though, were disappointing when confronted with
complex games that can push a system to its limit.

With prices coming down, PC gamers on the verge of buying a new machine
must ask themselves: Does it look cool, and can it run "Crysis"?

"Crysis," a futuristic first-person shooting game, has steeper hardware
requirements than typical games, which already tend to push the
boundaries. So if your computer is powerful enough for "Crysis," it can
likely run any game on the market.

The machines that run "Crysis" well have powerful graphics cards and
multi-core processors - essentially several processors on a single chip
working in synch.

These computers also have a generous amount of random access memory, or
RAM, which is key to letting games to run smoothly. The myriad
computations a game requires each second are primarily made with data
uploaded on the fly to the available RAM on your computer. The more you
have, the more data your computer can access quickly.

In my tests, Falcon Northwest delivers the best machines when price is
no object.

At $3,856, Falcon Northwest's diminutive FragBox is a serious ding to

the wallet, but it packs twin graphics cards for multiple display support, 12 gigabytes of RAM and an Intel Core i7 processor rated at cool 3.06 gigahertz - all in a box that's much shorter than the typical tower PC. At that price, you also get a 24-inch Samsung high-definition LCD display.

The FragBox ran "Crysis" and another processor hog, "Red Faction: Guerrilla," without a hitch. These are two of the most demanding games on the market because of their detailed graphics and complex action sequences.

The FragBox also scored well in benchmark tests I conducted using software from Futuremark Corp., which measures graphics rendering and other processing tasks at various display sizes and quality settings. Put simply, the FragBox can run the most complex games at the most extreme settings.

Contrast that with something at the low end of the price spectrum: the $499 Maelstrom from CyberPower Inc.

It's a full-sized, tower unit that has a rugged, futuristic appearance. This unit comes with an AMD Athlon 2.8 GHz processor and 2 gigabytes of RAM. That's one-sixth the memory offered by the FragBox.

There is noticeable lag if you're attempting to play games on a large display at full screen and in high resolution with a paltry amount of RAM. I had to settle for playing "Crysis" and "Red Faction" in a smaller window; the dreamy full-screen experience was a no-go here.

CyberPower did come through strong, however, with another tower model priced $500 higher at $999. The Gamer Xtreme 4200 sports an ATI Radeon high-definition graphics card and the latest Intel processor from the Lynnfield line, a Core i5 running at 2.66 GHz.

More importantly, the Gamer Xtreme 4200 has double the RAM - at 4 gigabytes. That helps support Intel's new chipset, and the results showed. The benchmark test scores revealed high frame rates per second when rendering graphics. I was able to play "Crysis" and "Red Faction" full-screen without any issues.

At a similar price, iBuyPower offers a variety of models, including the $999 Chimera. That machine performed admirably in tests. I didn't experience any performance drops when playing "Red Faction" at 1680 x 1050 resolution, an above average display quality. Bumping it up to 1920 x 1080, however, led to some lag and stuttering as I scanned the horizon for enemies during the game.

The Chimera comes with a decent ATI Radeon graphics card, but if you're going to spend an extra $150 on an upgrade, that would be the likely candidate. The chipset is solid, and the 4 gigabytes of RAM is fine. It just needs a stronger graphics card to take it to the next level.

If you simply must have a laptop specifically for your gaming needs, Dell's Alienware M17x is a smart buy, but it will set you back $1,799 at its cheapest configuration. I tried a tricked-out model that sells for $3,899. The result? I was able to play "Crysis" over coffee at a cafe in high definition at the most extreme settings, something few other laptop toters can boast.

One drawback of the Alienware laptop is size. It's a heavy beast that

you would never want to carry around in a backpack or briefcase. It's more of a desktop replacement than a traveling companion.

The M17x has an Intel Core2 Extreme Quad processor operating at 2.53 GHz, sitting alongside a powerful graphics card to deliver those high-frame rates for "Crysis" and similar games. It comes with 4 gigabytes of RAM, and all the components are fine-tuned to deliver a high-end, high-quality gaming experience.

In summary, if you've got $1,000 or less to spend, I'd recommend something from CyberPower. The company builds very aggressively styled, affordable machines that can still give you decent play. If money is no object and you want a machine that looks nicer than a Ferrari, Falcon Northwest is the trend setter.

Anything less than $700 runs the risk of feeling slow and outdated once the next incarnation of "Crysis" comes out. If you're at all a serious gamer, you're better off spending a little more and planning ahead.

China Blames Online Games for Drugs, Murder, Teen Pregnancy

China's state news channel has blamed hugely popular online games for problems including drug addiction, teen pregnancy and even murder this month as regulators crack down on allegedly harmful content in games.

In a program titled "Confession of a Murderer - Focus on Pornography and Violence in Online Games (Part Two)," China Central Television (CCTV) on Thursday reported on a Beijing juvenile prison where one man was serving a life sentence for murders he committed to obtain virtual equipment in an online game. Up to 80 percent of the violent criminals in the prison turned to crime because of online games, the report said.

"He himself killed five people, and the reason he took the path to crime was addiction to violent online games," it said.

The program follows other CCTV reports this month that have blamed social ills on online games and given voice to concerns among some Chinese parents that excessive time spent on games and social-networking sites is interfering with their children's schoolwork.

The reports, which also come amid a wide-reaching government campaign against Internet pornography, show how erratic political conditions can threaten companies operating in China. Chinese regulators this year have shut down dozens of online games designed overseas and ordered developers to stop including "lowbrow" content like monster-hunting in games. A struggle between government agencies for the right to regulate online games has further roiled the industry and helped send the hit game World of Warcraft offline for three months earlier this year.

Chinese state media have long criticized online games. The last installment of the CCTV series told the story of a 14-year-old girl purportedly influenced by an online dancing game to start having sex with people she met online. The game, called "Audition," was said to encourage one-night stands and the girl to have had two abortions.

CCTV this month also aired a report on teenagers who became addicted to cough medicine and then drugs like methamphetamine as a way to keep

their energy up during all-night gaming marathons. The boys were said to spend their time in Internet cafes, which are often filled with chain-smoking young men using instant-messaging programs and playing online games.

China has the largest number of Internet users in any country with at least 338 million people online. Over 210 million of those people play online games, according to a government survey.

Boston Mom Calls 911 Over Son's Video Game Habit

Police say a frustrated Boston woman called 911 to say she couldn't get her 14-year-old son to stop playing video games and go to sleep.

Police spokesman Officer Joe Zanoli said Monday the mother called for help around 2:30 a.m. Saturday to say that the teenager also walked around the house and turned on all the lights.

Two officers who responded to the house persuaded the child to obey his mother.

Zanoli says the mother's 911 call over video game obsession "was a little unusual, but by no means is it surprising - especially in today's day and age when these kids play video games and computer games."

The Boston Herald first reported the 911 call, saying the boy was playing the popular "Grand Theft Auto" game.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

OLPC Vision Points Toward a $75 Tablet Computer

One Laptop Per Child (OLPC), the nonprofit organization that created a radical, inexpensive laptop for children in developing countries, is working on another vision. It wants to build a $75 tablet computer to succeed its XO laptop.

Called the XO-3 and targeted for release in 2012, the 8.5-inch by 11-inch concept is entirely a thin touchscreen with no physical buttons. The tablet was designed by Yves Behar, founder of FuseProject, which also designed the XO.

Behar told news media that OLPC founder Nicholas Negroponte "asked for something extremely simple and practically frameless," with the content "the prime visual element." The XO-3, with an eight-gigahertz processor, is intended to be rugged, all plastic, waterproof, half the iPhone's

thickness, and requiring less than a watt of power.

Other planned features include an ultra-low-power screen, a camera on the back, and a fingerhold ring in the corner. Instead of a charging port, wireless induction through the rubber frame is envisioned.

OLPC's original vision, the XO, has had some impact in the developing world, although not the huge footprint once envisioned. Originally touted as a $100 laptop, its price is now closer to $170, and it hasn't reached its original goal of placing computers in the hands of tens of millions of schoolchildren.

Negroponte blamed Intel, among others, for undercutting OLPC's efforts in the third world by offering its own low-end model. Costs, third-world politics, and issues of long-term support have also impacted the organization's sales.

OLPC is trying another route for its newest vision. The XO-3 will have an open architecture and other PC makers will be encouraged to make the device. "We don't necessarily need to build it," Negroponte told Forbes magazine. "We just need to threaten to build it."

In the history books, OLPC's success might be weighted more heavily on the impact it has had, rather than the number of units sold. Although a pure cause-and-effect relationship is hard to pinpoint, when Negroponte starting touting a $100 laptop, the industry was building more powerful laptops with each generation, and prices remained relatively high. Now the hottest new category is netbooks - small laptops that cost a few hundred dollars each and are rapidly increasing in power.

And the idea that the world's poorest children should have portable, engaging computers is no longer on the edge of science fiction. A million OLPC laptops are reported to be in the hands of children in developing countries, such as every public-school child between the ages of six and 12 in Uruguay.

Perhaps OLPC's real value is pointing to where technology can move in its next incarnation and price points. If so, the XO-3 could be pointing in the next direction.

Tablet computers are looking like they might emerge as a real product category in the next year, with Apple rumored ready to release one, leaked photos of a concept model from Microsoft, and some models already on the market from smaller makers. Additionally, the fast-moving e-book market looks like it might be heading for a merger someday with the tablets.

Ross Rubin, director of industry analysis for consumer technology at the NPD Group, called the XO-3 concept "a very significant departure" from the original XO. He cautioned that, "in the past, we've seen OLPC prototypes go through many changes" as they head into release. In particular, he noted that the price "would be a challenge."

But the XO-3, Rubin said, could be "a big step forward that, once again, has potential outside of developing nations."

White House Picks New Cyber Coordinator

The White House has tapped a corporate cyber security expert and former Bush administration official to lead the effort to shore up the country's computer networks and better coordinate with companies that operate 80 percent of those critical systems.

Howard A. Schmidt, a former eBay and Microsoft executive, will become the government's cyber security coordinator, weathering a rocky selection process that dragged on for months, as others turned the job down.

In a letter posted on the White House web site Tuesday, John Brennan, assistant to President Barack Obama for homeland security and counterterrorism, said Schmidt will have regular access to the president and play a vital role in the country's security.

Schmidt's selection comes more than 10 months after Obama declared cyber security a priority and ordered a broad administration review.

A senior White House official said Obama was personally involved in the selection process and chose Schmidt because of his unique background and skills. Schmidt will have regular and direct access to the president for cyber security issues, the official said. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the selection process.

Obama released the findings of the cyber security review nearly seven months ago, vowing that the White House would name a cyber coordinator to deal with one of the "most serious economic and national security challenges we face as a nation."

U.S. government computer systems are being attacked or scanned millions of times a day. Hackers and cyber criminals pose an expanding threat, using increasingly sophisticated technologies to steal money or information, while nation-states probe for weaknesses in order to steal classified documents or technology or destroy the networks that run vital services.

Corporate computer security leaders have openly expressed frustration with the White House as movement on the job post stalled.

At the same time, cyber experts and potential job candidates have complained that the position lacks the budgetary and policy-making authority needed to be successful. Schmidt will report to the National Security Council and closely support the National Economic Council on cyber issues.

Schmidt's selection suggests that economic and business interests in the White House held more sway in the selection process. Schmidt, president and CEO of the Information Security Forum, a nonprofit international consortium that conducts research in information security, has served as chief security officer for Microsoft and as cyber security chief for online auction giant eBay. He was reportedly preferred by Lawrence Summers, director of the economic council.

Roger Thornton, a cyber security expert and chief technology officer for Fortify Software, praised the choice. He said Schmidt understands the technology, has broad management experience and has worked well within the political arena, a key requirement for the White House post.

"I think he would be able to get people to compromise and move things forward," said Thornton.

Considered an expert in computer forensics, Schmidt's roughly 40-year career includes 31 years in local and federal government service, including a stint as vice chairman of President George W. Bush's Critical Infrastructure Protection Board. He also was for a short time an adviser to the FBI and worked at the National Drug Intelligence Center.

Congress members, business leaders and cyber security experts have called for a more coordinated effort by the federal government to monitor and protect U.S. systems and work with the private sector to insure that transportation systems, energy plants and other sensitive networks are equally protected.

Court Bans Sale of Word; Microsoft Has Fix Ready

A federal appeals court ordered Microsoft Corp. to stop selling its Word program in January and pay a Canadian software company $290 million for violating a patent, upholding the judgment of a lower court.

But people looking to buy Word or Microsoft's Office package in the U.S. won't have to go without the software. Microsoft said Tuesday it expects that new versions of the product, with the computer code in question removed, will be ready for sale when the injunction begins on Jan. 11.

Toronto-based i4i Inc. sued Microsoft in 2007, saying it owned the technology behind a tool in the popular word processing program. The technology in question gives Word users an improved way to edit XML, or code that tells the program how to interpret and display a document's contents.

A Texas jury found that Microsoft Word willfully infringed on the patent. Microsoft appealed that decision, but the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit on Tuesday upheld the lower court's damage award and the injunction against future sales of infringing copies of Word.

Michel Vulpe, founder and co-inventor of i4i, said in a statement that the company is pleased with the decision, calling it "an important step in protecting the property rights of small inventors."

Microsoft said it has been preparing for such a judgment since August. Copies of Word and Office sold before Jan. 11 aren't affected by the court's decision. And Microsoft said it has "put the wheels in motion to remove this little-used feature" from versions of Word 2007 and Office 2007 that would be sold after that date.

"Beta" or test versions of Word 2010 and Office 2010, expected to be finalized next year, do not contain the offending code, the software maker said.

Redmond, Wash.-based Microsoft said it may appeal further, asking for either a rehearing in front of the appeals court's full panel of judges or in front of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Apple Tablet Coming in January?

After months of rumors, we still know very little about Apple's tablet device - but that could change very soon. Apple is reportedly holding a media event in San Francisco on January 26, where the company is expected to make a major product announcement.

According to the Financial Times' unnamed sources, Apple will make the announcement at the Yerba Buena Arts Center, the same place where Apple chief executive Steve Jobs showed off new iPods in September.

Other rumors back up this story. Business Insider reports that Apple will demonstrate the tablet in January. Business Insider also says that Apple has told select developers to get ready, saying their apps will run fine if they've been designed for full-screen resolution. The New York Times reports, via an unnamed senior Apple employee, that Steve Jobs is "extremely happy" with the device. No one's saying the device will launch next month - March seems more likely - but it'll be the first time Apple actually comes clean with its plans.

For some perspective on how ridiculous the rumor mill has become, think of all the Apple tablet coverage you've read over the past half year, then try to tell someone at your next holiday dinner party what the device will be. You really can't; reports about the device's capabilities and design have been all over the map.

We've heard that the Apple tablet will offer a 9.7-inch screen and sell for $800, or maybe a 6-inch screen, and will sell for under $700. We've also heard it will feature a 10.1-inch screen and retail for a cool $1000. As if that's not enough, yesterday Boy Genius Report said there's a 7-inch model (price unspecified) in addition to the 10-inch tablet. An analyst recently said the tablet will either run OS X or something like the iPhone OS. We've heard that it will play HD video, read e-books, and save the newspaper industry. With all due respect, I'd expect any other tablet to do the same.

So I'm thrilled that the rumors may finally be put to rest in January. But since those hopes are pinned on rumors themselves, we'll just have to exercise a little patience.

Google Targets Microsoft Office with DocVerse Deal

Google is moving in on yet another acquisition. This time the search giant reportedly has its eye on a plug-in that lets people collaborate around Microsoft Office documents.

According to published reports, Google is acquiring a San Francisco-based startup called DocVerse for about $25 million. The acquisition could undergird Google's recent Appjet purchase. Appjet is the maker of Etherpad, which also offers Microsoft Office collaboration capabilities.

DocVerse officially launched on Oct. 28 to serve the 600 million Office users looking for a better way to edit and share Microsoft documents. DocVerse is a plug-in for Microsoft Office that turns the suite of productivity applications into web-enabled collaboration tools and allows real-time sharing and simultaneous group editing of documents.

With DocVerse, Google would not only pick up a product to help its users bridge the Office gap. It could also pick up two Microsoft veterans, Shan Sinha and Alex DeNeui.

The duo founded DocVerse in 2007 to eliminate the constant back-and-forth e-mail attachments required to share and edit Word, PowerPoint and Excel documents. Sinha oversaw Microsoft's product strategy for the $1.6 billion SharePoint business and $3 billion SQL Server business while DeNeui oversaw Microsoft's SQL Server web strategy.

Sinha is no stranger to entrepreneurship. He cofounded two venture-backed startups, one of which has already been acquired. He also has fund-raising skills. DocVerse raised its first round of investment in 2008, $1.3 million from Baseline Ventures, Naval Ravikant, and Harrison Metal Capital.

DeNeui also brings experience to the startup. Before his tenure with Microsoft, he founded a Kleiner Perkins-backed enterprise software company delivering IT automation services. It's not clear whether the duo will join Google or move on to another startup if their company is acquired.

Greg Sterling, principal analyst at Sterling Market Intelligence, called the reported acquisition "interesting." Although DocVerse was founded by ex-Microsoft talent, he said, the application's philosophy, with its cloud and collaboration capabilities, is very much consistent with Google Wave and Google's efforts with its Apps and Docs suites.

"This also seems like a tool that will make Google Docs and Apps more useful in recognition of the fact that most people for the foreseeable future are going to be using Microsoft Office," Sterling said. "Yet this speeds the transition to the cloud and provides a bridge of sorts between Microsoft Office and Google Docs."

Of course, Microsoft is also moving into the cloud with its Office 2010, which will combat Google Docs. Microsoft released the beta version of Office 2010 in November with hopes that millions of people would download and test the product and offer feedback.

Microsoft is rolling out several new features in Office 2010 to sharpen its chances against an aggressive Google. One key new offering is the Outlook Social Connector, which brings communications history, business collaboration, and social-network feeds directly into Outlook, with support for Windows Live and SharePoint server.

Firefox 3.5 Edges Ahead in Browser Race

In the unceasing race for market share, Mozilla's Firefox has edged ahead of Microsoft's Internet Explorer, at least according to one statistical snapshot of which browser versions Web surfers use.

"Firefox 3.5 is now the most popular browser worldwide," said Aodhan Cullen, CEO of StatCounter, the company that compiled the statistics. Cullen quickly added that all the versions of Firefox being used don't equal in number all the versions of IE in use, but said the statistic is telling nonetheless, given that Firefox's market share continues to increase while IE's continues to erode.

In a weekly tally of the types of browsers being used on StatCounter customers' sites, the Web analytics firm's Global Stats Web service, showed that, between Dec. 14 and Dec. 20, the user base of Firefox 3.5 exceeded that of Internet Explorer version 7 for the first time ever. By StatCounter's reckoning, 21.39 percent of visitors used Firefox version 3.5, whereas 21.2 percent of visitors ran Internet Explorer version 7. (Though it is growing in popularity, IE 8 represented only 20.33 percent of the users during that week).

Of course, only when comparing specific versions of browsers does Firefox come out ahead. In another statistical snapshot using the same data and covering that same week, a cumulative total of 55.44 percent of users used a version of Internet Explorer, while 32.12 percent of users deployed some version of Firefox.

Cullen said that Firefox's popularity is especially remarkable given the fact that users must install the browser onto their computers, while IE comes already installed on new computers running Microsoft Windows. "The market has spoken," he said.

At this point in time, Firefox seems to be enjoying a greater adoption rate than Internet Explorer. Since the first week of the year, IE has lost over 17 percent of its user base, while Firefox has gained 25 percent more users. In the first week of the 2009, 67.22 percent of users deployed one version or another of Internet Explorer, and 25.62 percent of surfers used a version of Firefox.

Moreover, the adoption rate of the current version of Firefox, version 3.5, seems to have edged ahead of the adoption rate of the current version of IE 8. The week of Nov 9, both browsers had nearly identical market share of just over 19.5 percent. Since then, the Firefox 3.5 usage rate has grown by 12 percent while Internet Explorer 8 usage rate has grown by only 3 percent.

For this latest week, Chrome had 5.47 percent market share, Safari had 3.46 percent market share and Opera enjoyed 2.07 percent of the user base.

The Global Stats service is a free, frequently-updated summary of global Web user statistics offered by StatCounter, a Web analytics firm. Data is drawn from StatCounter's customer base, which runs over 3 million Web sites distributed across a wide variety of industries and interests. StatCounter places tracking code on each customer's Web pages, the data from which is used to deliver analytic usage reports to the customer. Global Stats is anonymous compilation of all the data collected by StatCounter.

The race will continue to be a heated one: Microsoft's recently released Windows 7 will no doubt propel further adoption of Internet Explorer 8, Cullen noted, though other browsers will get a boost as well thanks to the recent European Union directive for Microsoft to include other browser options on the OS.

Ford Will Let Car Occupants Access the Web at 70 mph

Starting next year, the latest trend for with-it groups of travelers could be posting on each others' Facebook pages while hurtling down the

highway. On Monday, Ford Motor Company announced that cars with its next-generation SYNC system will be able to use a USB broadband modem to turn the entire car into a Wi-Fi hot spot.

The capability, available on selected vehicles, won't require any additional hardware or subscriptions, except for a mobile broadband modem or "air card," which is not supplied by the car maker and connects to a USB port on the car. Wi-Fi will then be available throughout the car wherever the broadband modem has reception.

Mark Fields, president of Ford's Americas division, said that "while you're driving to grandma's house, your spouse can be finishing the holiday shopping and the kids can be chatting with friends and updating their Facebook profiles."

Lest one shudder at the thought that any Wi-Fi-equipped laptop in an adjacent car could tap into the traveling hot spot, Ford said only owner-permitted devices will be able to use the network, and standard Protected Access 2 (WPA2) security protocols will be employed. Users have to enter a randomly chosen password, and any new Wi-Fi device must be specifically allowed to connect by the driver.

Ford said the potential customer base for this feature is more than a third of Americans, who, according to a study by the Consumer Electronics Association, would like to be able to check e-mail and visit web sites in their vehicles.

The USB port to the SYNC system will take any external technology plugged into it, which the company said would allow the system to "ensure 'forward compatibility'" by leveraging a user's current hardware.

The SYNC system, developed by Ford with Microsoft, provides in-car communications and entertainment, and was first shown at the 2007 Consumer Electronics Show. It's an integrated, flash-memory-based system that allows such things as drivers making hands-free calls, or the ability to control digital audio through voice commands or steering-wheel-mounted controls. The voice-recognition system can accommodate English, Spanish and Canadian French.

Ford is also reported to have decided to make the platform open source, so third-party developers can create downloadable applications for use in the car, such as traffic reports or news. This would make Ford's SYNC-equipped cars into a new kind of platform, comparable to, say, iPhones.

Bill Ho, an analyst with industry research firm Current Analysis, compared car-based Wi-Fi to the popular MiFi, a personal router that turns a 3G signal into a hot spot. He noted, however, that "there may be some performance issues when you're comparing a static hot spot to a mobile one."

Ho added that "being connected is the way to go," so expect to see more car makers getting their vehicles connected not only through GPS units but to the Internet.

YouTube Launches URL Shortening Service

Guess who has its own link shortening service now?

Following hot on the heels of similar announcements by Google and
Facebook, YouTube is launching its own shortening service. The
Google-owned video service is rolling out youtu.be for those overly
complicated YouTube URLs.

Users can either access the feature automatically by linking up their
YouTube account to Twitter and Google Reader via AutoShare or by
manually replacing the URL http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=" with
"http://youtu.be/".

China To Require Internet Domain Name Registration

China has issued new Internet regulations, including what appears to be an
effort to create a "whitelist" of approved websites that could potentially
place much of the Internet off-limits to Chinese readers.

The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology ordered domain
management institutions and internet service providers to tighten
control over domain name registration, in a three-phase plan laid out on
its website (www.miit.gov.cn late on Sunday.

"Domain names that have not registered will not be resolved or
transferred," MIIT said, in an action plan to "further deepen" an
ongoing anti-pornography campaign that has resulted in significant
tightening of Chinese Internet controls.

Only allowing Chinese viewers to access sites registered on a whitelist
would give Chinese authorities much greater control, but would also
block millions of completely innocuous sites.

The rules did not specify whether the new measure applies to overseas
websites, but local media reported the risk that foreign sites that have
not registered could also be blocked.

"If some legal foreign websites could not be accessed because they
haven't registered with MIIT, it would be a pity for the Internet which
is meant to connect the whole world," the Beijing News said on Tuesday.

Chinese Internet controls currently follow a blacklist strategy, whereby
censors block sensitive sites as soon as they discover them. Earlier
this summer, MIIT tried to require that all new Chinese computers be
shipped with the Green Dam filter software, but partially backed off
after an international outcry.

The anti-pornography drive since this summer has also netted many sites
with politically sensitive or even simply user-generated content, in
what many see as an effort by the Chinese government to reassert control
over new media and its potential for citizens sharing information and
organizing.

"One interpretation is that all foreign websites would need to register
in order not to be blocked in China," said Rebecca MacKinnon of the
Journalism and Media Studies Center at the University of Hong Kong.

"These are the folks who brought us Green Dam so anything is possible.

They are people with a track record of emitting unreasonable schemes."

The registration requirements could constitute a barrier to trade, if Chinese citizens are prevented from accessing legitimate overseas businesses, added MacKinnon.

China banned a number of popular websites and Internet services in 2009, including Google's Youtube, Twitter, Flickr and Facebook, as well as Chinese content sharing sites, including sites popular for music and film downloads.

Angry Chinese Twitter users flooded a Twitter look-alike service (t.people.com.cn launched by the official People's Daily on Tuesday, causing it to be immediately shut down.

Many virtual private network, or VPN, services used to get around Web restrictions have also become harder to use from China, while 20 million people living in the frontier region of Xinjiang have been cut off from the Internet and international telephone services since deadly ethnic riots in July.

"What usually happens when suddenly compiled rules appear without warning is that they are rarely enforced. My gut reaction is that this is yet another of those cases," said Beijing-based technology commentator Kaiser Kuo.

College Asks Students To Power Down, Contemplate

Dianne Lynch wanted to give the students of Stephens College a break from the constant digital communication that pervades their generation. So she asked them to put their phones and computers away and revive the 176-year-old school's dormant tradition of vespers services.

On a bitterly cold December night, with the start of final exams just hours away, about 75 of Stephens' 766 undergraduates grudgingly piled their cell phones into collection baskets and filed into the school's candlelit chapel, where they did little but sit, silently. For an hour, not an iPod ear bud could be seen. There were no fingers flying on tiny computer keyboards, no chats with unseen intimates.

Alexis Dornseif, a senior from suburban St. Louis majoring in fashion marketing and management, said she needed time away from her busy life.

"Sometimes it's really overwhelming," she said. "It's good to have time to think, to not worry about what's going on tomorrow."

Lynch, the president of the women's college, is no technophobe. Her doctorate research focused on "digital natives," teenagers who grew up with "the Internet as a part of their operating assumption in the world." She knows most of her students consider their cell phones a social necessity. The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project has found that 82 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds own cell phones. Ninety-four percent of teens spend time online.

But Lynch fears all that time spent in the 21st century's town square leaves few opportunities for clutter-free thought. She wants the students to also pursue the more elusive state of mind that comes with

silence.

Several other schools are encouraging technology-free introspection. Amherst College in Massachusetts hosted a "Day of Mindfulness" this year, featuring yoga and meditation and a lecture on information technology and the contemplative mind entitled "No Time to Think."

"Students welcome it," said Amherst physics professor Arthur Zajonc, director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. "It's a complement to the very hurried world of gadgets they normally live in."

At Stephens, Lynch hit on the idea for reviving vespers after an alumnae group regaled her with fond memories of Sunday nights in the school chapel. Once a Baptist school but now secular, Stephens required vespers services as often as four times each week starting in 1920.

"Just a wonderful opportunity to calm down," said Neel Stallings, a career-development consultant in Charlotte, N.C., who graduated from Stephens in 1967. "To have a place to go to just tune out all of the extra noise, and to tune into yourself, was the most valuable thing."

By the late 1960s, vespers had become more spiritual than religious, no longer mandatory and held only once a week. By the 1980s the program was gone.

The new vespers program is voluntary, at least for now. Lynch hopes to have the services twice a month, to reinforce the school's mission of teaching young women to be self-reliant.

"You will need to be able to sit, to be quiet, to be alone with yourself, to have those moments of self-reflection," she said.

Those moments are infrequent on the modern college campus. Seconds after the end of the first revived vespers service, students got their cell phones back, and the flickering assortment of screens replaced the need for mood-setting candlelight.

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material herein is believed to be accurate at the time of publishing.